

## THE HISTORY PROFESSIONAL

*Stacey Bredhoff has been a curator with the National Archives and Records Administration since 1985 and with its John F. Kennedy Library and Museum since 2008. She has created numerous exhibits, and authored several accompanying catalogues, the latest being “To the Brink: JFK and the Cuban Missile Crisis” in celebration of the 50th anniversary of that crisis.*



Stacey Bredhoff

*How did you first become interested in and involved in museum work?*

I have always been interested in museums, for the way they can transport you to another time or another way of life. Historic museums and sites have always sparked my imagination and curiosity. When it came time to choose a career, I explored the different aspects of museum work and found I was most interested in education and interpretation inside museums. I focused on the kind of work that both allowed me to be immersed in a topic and then to convey the information to a larger audience.

*Prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis exhibit, what two or three projects did you most enjoy working on, and why?*

The “American Originals” exhibit was one of my favorites. It was actually a series of exhibits, presented in the National Archives Rotunda in Washington, DC, first in 1996, and then as a traveling exhibit hosted at six museums across the country. It aimed to present a sampling of records that would reflect the breadth and richness of the Archives’ holdings: at different times, the exhibit included everything from President Nixon’s resignation letter and artifacts associated with the Watergate break-in to George Washington’s handwritten draft of his first inaugural address. We included a letter from Annie Davis, who wrote to President Lincoln after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, to ask if she were free. The exhibit served as a framework to showcase some of the most compelling and intriguing records, while also featuring and celebrating the great milestone events in American history. The traveling exhibit opened in New York City just three weeks after 9-11, and it was wonderful to present some of the nation’s great milestone documents—like records from the Continental Congress and the Revolutionary War—documents that chronicled past challenges that nation had faced—items that could inspire and encourage and lift the spirits of people at the exact moment when, as a nation, we

were dealing with a shocking national tragedy.

I also loved working on the exhibit that opened in the Rotunda in 2003, “A New World Is at Hand,” which chronicled the creation of the nation’s Charters: the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. It was a fantastically enriching experience to really delve into the story of the American Revolution, to become acquainted with the documents at the National Archives that tell that story, and to present them to the wide audience that visits the National Archives.

*Have you changed your approach to creating exhibits or your methodologies in any way since starting at the Kennedy Library?*

No, I don’t think so. My approach has always been to start with the records and to take direction from them. You don’t have to be an expert to appreciate the stories that are told in the records. Once we have a general exhibit theme, I work with secondary sources and consult subject experts to get oriented to the topic; then, without imposing preconceptions, I explore the records, flagging the ones that take your breath away. The selection of records always drives the exhibit story line and organization. And it’s always a collaboration involving exhibit designers, archivists, and subject specialists to come up with the most effective presentation of the records and the story they tell.



*How do you think your professional duties differ from those of a nonfederal museum specialist?*

This job has put me in close contact with some of the nation’s most significant and valuable documents, including the official records from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, correspondence from Abraham Lincoln, the original Emancipation Proclamation, firsthand accounts of Civil War battles, milestone treaties, as well as lesser-known accounts from people whose names have escaped the history books, but whose words



breathe humanity into monumental events. The holdings belong to the American public, and it is our job as federal curators to not only preserve the records for future generations but to provide access to them. In that respect, providing opportunities for the public to have contact with the *original* material, for being in the physical presence of the authentic object, is the experience that we can offer in an exhibit.

*How do you handle questions of interpretation in an exhibit?*

It is not enough to install documents and artifacts in a gallery without any explanation. Visitors can and should expect curators to present some kind of historical context. But I think it is important to structure the exhibit narrative in a way that aims at balance, an attempt to stay close to the facts and true to the story. I believe we must aim to present the material in ways that allow visitors to form their own opinions about events and the materials they are viewing. Curators can acknowledge in the exhibit text that there are different ways to “interpret” these materials and that historians often disagree.

*For this Cuban Missile Crisis exhibit, did you gain any new historical insights from your research that influenced the concept and design?*

One goal of the Cuban Missile Crisis exhibit was to create a presentation that reflected the most recent scholarship. Over the past 20 years, scholars have uncovered sources in the United States, Russia, and Cuba that have

changed our understanding of what happened. Some of what we have learned suggests that the crisis was even more dangerous than we had known. For example, the United States was very concerned about the Soviet submarines positioned close to the Soviet ships near the Quarantine line, some 500 miles from the Cuban coast. (The Quarantine was established to prevent any further Soviet military equipment from reaching Cuba.) The President approved the use of depth charges, or small explosives, to force the submarines to surface. We have only recently learned that the effects of those depth charges were much more severe than had been anticipated; they so agitated one Soviet submarine commander that he ordered the arming of a nuclear-tipped torpedo.

Also, as a result of the wealth of historical resources that have become available in recent years, we have a clearer understanding of Khrushchev’s decision-making process, and a fuller picture of Cuba’s role in the crisis; the exhibit was informed by this new information.

*This exhibit was a major collaborative effort within the National Archives. How did that wider cooperation benefit the project?*

The project benefitted from participation by archival experts from both the Kennedy Library and the National Archives in DC. It also benefitted from the fact that my collaboration with the National Archives’ two senior designers, Ray Ruskin and Michael Jackson, was a reunion of an exhibits team that had previously worked together on many projects in Washington. So, it was a wonderful



*President Kennedy meeting with the Ex Comm during the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 29, 1962.*

See more on this exhibit at <http://www.archives.gov/nae/visit/gallery.html> and the catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/nae/support/shop/books.html>



experience to have the opportunity to work with my former colleagues once again. But, there are definitely challenges for a team working in different cities. You can't just walk down the hall and talk through some issue, as you normally would—maybe even several times a day. But, it is hard to imagine how we could have collaborated as successfully within the same time frame if we were not already well acquainted with one other.

*White House audio excerpts seem to bind the Cuban Missile Crisis exhibit together. Was that your intention?*

We did intend for the audio excerpts to be the centerpiece of the exhibit. The recordings are from the meetings of the Ex Comm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council), the advisory group assembled by President Kennedy to formulate a response to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Throughout the 13 most intense days of the crisis, October 16–28, the group met almost continuously, and—unbeknownst to almost all of them—President Kennedy recorded those meetings. Listening to those recordings puts people inside the room where the President and his most trusted advisers were working furiously to avert a nuclear catastrophe. It is striking how the President and some of the nation's highest officials were groping in the dark, trying to discern Khrushchev's purposes, trying to interpret conflicting intelligence, while they were racing against time to prevent the Soviets from completing work on the nuclear weapons installations just 90 miles from our shores. Although we know that the crisis did not end in nuclear war, it is still a sobering and frightening experience to hear the voices on those recordings.

*What do you want visitors to experience most vividly from this exhibit?*

There is a great deal to be learned in observing the process of how the President came to his decisions. He assembled a group that would provide a wide range of opinions, and explored his options thoroughly. He did not rush to act. He encouraged people to express their opinions; he understood when they changed their positions. He remained remarkably calm and tolerant even of views that were critical of him. He resisted any inclination to act rashly, and would not be deterred from finding a negotiated settlement.

We tried to present the crisis in the larger context of the Cold War, so that visitors would be aware of the nuclear threat that cast a large shadow over those years; and we also wanted to give people the experience of being a “fly on the wall” during those high-level, top-secret meetings. We wanted people to hear the tension and anxiety and exhaustion that, at times, permeated the discussions. It is our hope that visitors will come to understand the Cuban Missile Crisis—not just intellectually—but emotionally, as well.

*Interview by Benjamin Guterman*

## FOIA MATTERS

For years, historians and genealogists traced parentage by filing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests with the Social Security Administration (SSA). In 2011, the SSA implemented a new policy regarding release of information in cases involving extreme age from its Form SS-5, which is used to apply for a Social Security number.

Researchers who previously received unredacted SS-5 forms from the SSA instead were told that parents' names cannot be released because they are protected from a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy under both Exemption 6 of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(6), and the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. § 552a(b).

Many of those requesters came to OGIS, which learned that the SSA's official policy on the release of parents' names on SS-5 forms is that the agency will not release those names unless

- It receives their written consent or proof of death
- Their birth dates are more than 120 years ago, or
- The number holder on the SS-5 is at least 100 years old.

Acceptable proof of death includes a death certificate, a statement of death by a funeral director, an obituary or newspaper article, or a coroner's report.

In creating the policy, SSA looked at how other agencies, including the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, handle records involving extreme age. Generally, both agencies will not release records about individuals who are younger than 100 years without proof of death. Because SS-5s are unique in that they list both parents' names, the SSA added 20 years to the 100-year requirement to protect the parents' privacy interests.

As a result of discussions with OGIS, SSA FOIA professionals agreed to revisit its policy on SS-5s to reconsider whether the current age thresholds are too restrictive. Stay tuned to the OGIS website for any updates: [ogis.archives.gov](http://ogis.archives.gov).

### OGIS

Office of Government  
Information Services

### NEED FOIA ASSISTANCE?

The Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) is here to help. Created by

Congress in 2007 as the Federal FOIA Ombudsman and housed at the National Archives, OGIS provides mediation services—ranging from formal mediation to facilitation to ombuds services—to help resolve disputes between FOIA requesters and Federal agencies. For more information, visit [www.ogis.archives.gov](http://www.ogis.archives.gov). OGIS can be reached at [ogis.archives.gov](http://ogis.archives.gov) or at 202-741-5770.